

THE BIG CHIEF OF AFRICA

The *Kragdadige* Leadership Impulses of Jacob Zuma



Here we have a cunning, crafty and wily old fox who uses the traditional base to manipulate his way through the turbulence and turmoil of politics as the underdog and the victim.

By Chris Landsberg

A man under siege! A man under attack! An angry man! They say angry men are dangerous men. In recent years I have tried modestly to help fill a void by focussing on leadership, specifically international political leadership, and a country's domestic and international fortunes. Recent months have seen a confluence of circumstances and events that have led to the recent decision by some members of the African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Committee (NEC) calling on President Zuma to resign. For this meeting, the president's base and his ardent supporters were rallied to help stave off the call.

After the extended ANC NEC meeting at the end of November 2016, the ANC released a statement asserting that the real threats to the

revolution in South Africa are "racism, ethnic nationalism and monopoly capital". It was the emphasis on ethnic nationalism that struck a cord and in recent months we have witnessed increasing interest in and focus on the leadership styles and travails of President Jacob Zuma. A *kragdadige* (forceful), at times belligerent ethnic nationalism has played itself out as the President sought to deal with his challenges, travails and detractors and fight to restore his credibility.

In a riveting piece about President Zuma, ANC stalwart and veteran Mavuso Msimang wrote in an article in the *City Press* newspaper in November 2015 that President Zuma "is a very angry man". Msimang wrote this piece in reaction to President Zuma's off the cuff, unscripted words during an ANC Provincial conference. In that speech,

Zuma launched a "visceral attack on Kgalema Mothlante". Motlanthe made the mistake of criticising certain practices in the ANC, including corruption and factionalism. The former president quickly learned that the president did not take kindly to criticism of the ANC, the "collective" as he sees it, and less still criticism of him as president or person, as he is part of "the collective". He detests being removed from the collective and being singled out, for snakes are killed by chopping off the head. When he is targeted as the "head" he feels he is being likened to a snake; a bad omen in his culture.

Just when I thought this was an exception and not the rule I had to remind myself that, after being "relieved" of his duties in 2005 as Deputy President, Jacob Zuma went

to Kwazulu-Natal to bully-pulpit so as to reinforce his base and build up and consolidate his devotees. So when in November 2016 the president delivered another truculent, unscripted speech in KwaZulu-Natal, and this time round in his address to thousands of supporters at the ANC's victory rally in eDumbe, it was suggestive of a peculiar pattern that developed. Zuma vowed that he was "not scared of political parties who approach courts to scare" him. Said the Big Chief, "people think democracy is done at courts. They never mention the will of the people, they always talk about courts...They think by going to courts they are intimidating the ANC". A pugnacious, belligerent side revealed itself when he warned his detractors: "we are not going to be intimidated even if it means I get arrested today. I am used to it. I have spent a lot of time in jail. You cannot threaten me with jail time. I am not scared of jail time. I have been there".

I sat up and became increasingly intrigued by this curious style of Number 1, not just when he speaks unscripted and from the "heart" so to speak, without a text and with his mind really going political, but by his resorting to cultural and ethnic politics when he chooses KwaZulu-Natal as the base to go and deliver combative off the cuff speeches. Here is a man that has always been in touch with his traditional, cultural base, and when he feels he has his back to the wall, he goes back to the base for inspiration and support. The role of personality matters in politics, and speeches in both content and tone, and how the leader connects with popular constituencies can give one a true sense of someone's leadership style.

During the years 2015-16, it became plain that South Africa was searching for relevance and purpose in world affairs. The politics at home appeared feeble with the ruling ANC experiencing major internal challenges and its leader, President Zuma, finding himself bogged down in a number of political scandals and disgraces. The Constitutional Court ruled in March 2016 that the President was acting in ways that were outside the spirit and the letter of the constitution. The currency see-sawed at the hands of amorphous

"markets" amid speculation about the future of the President.

The ruling party appeared to have lost its political and strategic compass nationally and this sense of misdirection at home appears to have spilled over into the Republic's foreign affairs. South Africa has lost international respect and its sense of balance in global affairs, and when probed the issue of the leadership of the head of state is questioned.

On 18 November 2016, President Zuma again went to Pietermaritzburg in the heartland of his strong base in KwaZulu-Natal, and gave another one of those frank, and combative speeches. The President again openly expressed the view that the reason why we find ourselves in a global spot of bother was two-fold: he is not liked by some at home, including many in close ANC ranks, and that the ANC and South Africa are "not liked" globally. The President appealed for sympathy. He played the politics of victimhood and wanted his base to understand that he was being persecuted and tormented by enemies.

The President sharpened his tongue for those veterans who dared to challenge his authority and had the temerity to do so outside of ANC structures. He also belted former President Thabo Mbeki for a letter in which he implored Zuma to meet with the 101 veterans and stalwarts that was leaked to the media even before he received it.

International forces were not spared the President's ire. The reason why we are "not liked", according to the President, is because we are "independent" and we "chose to join the BRICS group". Said the President, "most people do not like us because we cannot be told what to do". BRICS is "a small group but is very powerful" and this constellation "had interfered with the global balance of forces" and "western forces did not like BRICS". President Zuma did not stop there. He argued that ratings agencies were part of the "arsenal being used by countries seeking to smash the BRICS alliance". This sounded like Kraal leadership not confined to domestic politics but also applied to BRICS and the Russian nuclear deal and heckling

critics were urged to back off their continuous strident criticism of ANC and government politics.

How true is it that South Africa's dwindling influence in world affairs, and the growing lack of respect, is the result of it being punished by the West for having had the audacity to join BRICS? There is no doubt that there is a sense of irritation on the part of the West for South Africa's perceived pivoting to China and outreach to Russia in search of a special and distinctive entente. Many in the West still believe that the fulcrum of South Africa's foreign affairs is with the West. The ANC is within its right to strengthening ties with Brazil, India, China and the broader South, and to stress that it believes in an "Africa first" policy. Ambivalence and criticism towards the "West" is understandable; but to use a foreign policy issue for kraal leadership to rally and mobilise the political base is a novelty in South African politics. Just as it becomes difficult to restore international confidence in its faltering economy, it became increasingly difficult to make sense of the Republic's domestic politics and global standing. The trivialisation of politics at home and personalisation of foreign policy appears to be a desperate quest by the Big Chief to restore his and the ANC's leadership and repair their dented prestige and reputation nationally and in world affairs.

This quest for embrace by the world and search for global status has revealed a crisis of confidence in the Republic's international affairs. All the bravado and at times defiance of its posture notwithstanding, the crisis at home appears to have spilled over into a crisis of conviction in foreign policy and diplomacy. South Africa's diplomacy and international relations could not escape the tormenting web of divisive and conflict-ridden slate politics that have come to beset the ANC. Foreign policy is now an extension of slanting regime politics.

South Africa's foreign policy appears to be caught between issues of liberation brotherhoods/sisterhoods and solidarity, the quest for national interests, and adhering to lofty, cosmopolitan, liberal values. While the rhetoric of foreign policy has an increasingly pro-Africa,

pro-Asia [read: pro-China], pro-South, and pro-multilateralism posture, and conversely an anti-US, and west, and anti-imperialism stance, the reality is that it is much closer to western powers than it cares to admit and recognise, while showing a palpable shift in its ties with Asia and South America. One of the motivations for its membership in Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) congregation for example is the idea of being a member of a “big club” that will help it to punch above its weight in foreign affairs, and help to enhance its prestige in world affairs. While President Zuma is of the view that South Africa is a “big player” in BRICS, others doubt whether South Africa is earning its keep in foreign policy.

Our foreign policy remains one that is driven by regime and self-interest considerations. In the 2015 ANC foreign policy discussion document, there is no reference at all to human rights, suggesting that the ANC, at least under President Zuma, is crafting a post-human rights international relations posture. The African continent’s woes are all laid at the door of exogenous factors as “imperialism and neo-colonial forces”, according to the ANC, “are responsible for the wave of social instability in our continent”. There is scarcely any reference to endogenous factors.

The Zuma government went to the extent of arguing that “the national interest” is the doctrine that would inform the country’s foreign policy. But in the realpolitik, self-interested world of President Zuma’s government, the national interest seem to have become a cover for regime interests and self-interest in an increasingly utilitarian, economic driven foreign policy that is pursued under the banner “Open for business...In a big way!”.

Laissez-Faire foreign policy decision-making of a Big Chief of Africa

In order to understand the current perplexing standing of South Africa in world affairs, we have to zero in more on the Polokwanisation of South African foreign policy decision-making. The fault-lines and deviations in South Africa’s foreign policy can best be explained by the haphazard manner in which policy is arrived at, based on

the fact that, just as government in the main has become factionalised and full of slates, so foreign policy reflects these unsettling trends. The bureaucracy and diplomatic machinery have become highly politicised, and the state and foreign policy apparatus has been on “auto pilot” for quite some time, with no epi-centre evident to drive strategic decision-making. Whereas the ANC was concerned with the emergence of two centres of power when President Mbeki was recalled in 2008, now multiple centres of power have emerged with no clear strategic centre of gravity.

During the past seven years policy-making and foreign policy formulation have been the result of a diffused and scattered, hurly-burly process. Just like with other aspects of the state and decision-making, foreign policy and

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diplomacy became characterised by fissures and frictions because of factional politics in the ANC after the deeply divisive Polokwane congress which resulted in the defeat of Thabo Mbeki, and his eventual recall in September 2007. The lack of strategic management of foreign policy and diplomacy became palpable after these developments.

Over the past year ANC Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe and President Jacob Zuma himself have bemoaned divisions and factionalisation in the ruling ANC. Foreign policy and diplomacy appear to have become a highly factionalised muddle, in which there is very little that is predictable. The much debated ANC foreign policy discussion document came about because of this laissez faire style as different groups

and factions in the ANC could not agree on what would be the final draft of the document that should see the light of day. Jacob Zuma is not a hands-on, policy president; nor a nuts-and-bolts foreign policy manager. This management style has spilled over into the realm of foreign policy where there is a real sense of vacuum and free-for-all paradigm at play.

During the past seven years one finds it difficult to locate the traces of the much-promised networking, consultative style of foreign policy as promised by president Zuma when he ran for president in 2009. We have instead seen a situation in which powerful interest groups have sought to gain access to a national interest-driven, utilitarian foreign policy that has as its main goal economic gains.

Conclusion

South Africa is struggling to find stability and cohesion at home and searching for a role and relevance in world affairs, and has sent many contradictory identity signals in this regard. The contradictory messaging in domestic and foreign policies has often resulted in the articulation of incongruous national and foreign policy postures by the Republic given the slate politics and factionalism in the ruling party.

Just as the Big Chief knows how to speak from both sides of his mouth, so South Africa has in recent years spoken with forked tongues in diplomacy, as different strategic documents say different and even contradictory things about the same issue.

In recent years and months we have witnessed growing tensions between self-interest and regime interests on the one hand, and lofty cosmopolitan values proclaimed to be central tenets of our domestic politics and foreign policy. These tensions are increasingly being played out in the realist, utilitarian, scorched-earth politics of Jacob Zuma, the man and the president. Here we have a cunning, crafty and wily old fox who uses the traditional base to manipulate his way through the turbulence and turmoil of politics as the underdog and the victim. Welcome to Zuma’s kraal! The Kraal of zero-sum politics. ■